

Magazzino Doganale: The Jefferson Crew

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In 2015 Ivano Trombino decided to leave the permanent job he had been carrying out for several years at an Italian liquor distribution company (i.e., Compagnia dei Caraibi) and decided to fund his own liquor company called “*Vecchio Magazzino Doganale*” in Montalto Uffugo, a small village near to Cosenza, in Calabria, a region located in the Southwest of Italy. Ivano – thick black beard, and a strong desire to talk about himself, including moving and funny anecdotes – envisioned a revolutionary concept of Italian liquor: no longer based on regional or local stereotypes, but based on a cosmopolitan image, winking to vintage, elegance but also to innovativeness and quality. All these elements are synthesized in the recipe invented by Ivano for his principal brand: the *Jefferson* bitter liquor. Moreover, he spent seven years reconstructing his family’s history experimenting with inter-bloom blends of Calabrian botanicals. Indeed, Calabria was already famous for the production of “*Vecchio Amaro del Capo*” a herb-based liquor produced by *Distilleria Caffo* that completely based its image on Calabria stereotype, in fact it recently introduced a chilly-variation of the same liqueur, as chilly is the mainstream symbol of Calabria in Italy.

Differently, Ivano’s liquors never mention in their package their Calabrian origin, despite all herbal ingredients comes from Calabria following a biologic processing.

This revolutionary approach, in Ivano’s vision, needs to ground on a deep change based not only in the development of a premium product made by traceable ingredients based on local excellence, but also in a brilliant communication strategy – based on personification, or anthropomorphism – aimed at boosting the quality and the uniqueness of his products. Based on a shipwreck of three Americans around 1800 in Calabria, Ivano Trombino built the communication of his company and of his liquors using storytelling technique, in between of legend and of the real history of his family.

Nowadays Ivano’s products (bottled near Cuneo, in the ancient Quaglia distillery) boast an international niche target, connoisseurs between 30 and 70 years old, and his most famous bitter liquor is called Jefferson.

The main Ivano’ idea was rather simple and ambitious at the same time: *to make the best liquor in the world, using only local, high-quality ingredients*. Indeed, the company won in 2018 the World Liqueur Award with its leading brand Jefferson defined by the committee award as “... *Strong nose, bitterness at the beginning coming through. Soft and smooth and very nicely balanced with a herbal finish*”¹(see fig. 1).

1. <http://www.worldliqueurawards.com/winner/liqueur/2018/design>.



Figure 1. Jefferson package

Despite the award has given to the company a huge media coverage and consumer awareness, the Jefferson liquor was already an established reality in the HORECA (i.e., Hotellerie-Restaurant-Café) business, as it was available in the best Italian wine bars and restaurants since its market introduction. Its main ingredients are mainly botanical herbs and citrus cultivated and selected in Calabria, as bergamot, bitter and sweet oranges, rosemary, eucalyptus, and oregano combined with other officinal herbs. The liquor can be appreciated both at room temperature and fresh, as a bitter or in support of vermouth².

As reported by Ivano Trombino, the Jefferson bitter represents an emblematic case of its product category, as after its introduction – and the 2018 award – all “bitter industry” of Calabria increased from the production of almost 4 bitters in 2016 (with “Amaro del Capo” by Caffo as market leader) to almost 54 produced in 2021.

However, differently from other national and regional bitters liquor, Jefferson is not available in the large supermarket chains but only in specialized wine bars hotels and restaurants, the unitary applied price is around 28 euros³ compared to an average price of 10 euros of other bitter liquors available on supermarkets, the communication appeal is based on vintage illustrations (instead of photos) applied on the liquor package that reports the Mr. Jefferson portray (see fig.2), and a related *storytelling* based on the product personification that is present on the company website (<https://www.vecchiomagazzinodoganale.com/en/>)

2. <https://www.vecchiomagazzinodoganale.com/en/>.

3. <https://www.amazon.it/JEFFERSON-AMARO-IMPORTANTE-SINCE-1871/dp/B07GS6GSWX>.



Figure 2. The iconography used for Jefferson representation.

Storytelling and Vintage Marketing as a Communication Strategy

A storytelling strategy implies the creation of stories or the imposture of a story-like structure on events. It is characterized by a narrative structure that consists of chronology and causality (Escalas, 2003) and can be used to communicate values activating deep-felt emotional responses to the consumers (Fog, 2010).

Marketing literature identifies storytelling strategy as one of the most successful for activating positive consumer brand relationships (Fetscherin and Heinrich, 2015), particularly in social media environments (Gensler et al., 2013), allowing brands to differentiate and grab consumers' attention (Woodside, 2010). Although little is known about the exact link between storytelling content and customer reactions, one of the key characteristics of storytelling is its emotional connotation, that in turn can activate customers' emotive involvement, and therefore positive responses (Escalas, 2004).

In particular, the company decided to rely on *vintage marketing*, a set of practices that are tied to notions of belonging (Warde, 2005; Murphy & Patterson, 2011). In fact, the idea itself to constitute the Vecchio Magazzino Doganale was aimed to connect Ivano Trombino to his family roots, and in particular with his great-great-grandfather, Raffaele, the original founder of the company.

The Story

Let's go to the Vecchio Magazzino Doganale storytelling: It is back in 1871 and Raffaele, known as “*u Giocondo*”, runs a shop in the countryside of the western hinterland of the Crati Valley, not far from Sartano (a hamlet of Torano Castello in Cosenza), the place of origin of the Trombino family. The “Magazzino Doganale” – this is the name of the shop – was one of the typical ones of that period, where it was possible to find everything, from nails to rope, spices, basic food items. On an unspecified date, while the optimistic wind of the Belle Epoque was beginning to blow in the rest of Europe, three Americans – Jefferson, Gil and Roger – came to the shop – from the Calabrian Tyrrhenian coast of Fiumefreddo Bruzio (Cosenza), where they were apparently landed because of a shipwreck (see fig. 3).

They had arrived in Italy after a trip from Panama to Genoa to deliver a load of cane alcohol, but they had then stopped in our country to carry out their trade. During one of their affairs along the Italian coasts, they suffered a shipwreck in Calabria in which they lost everything.

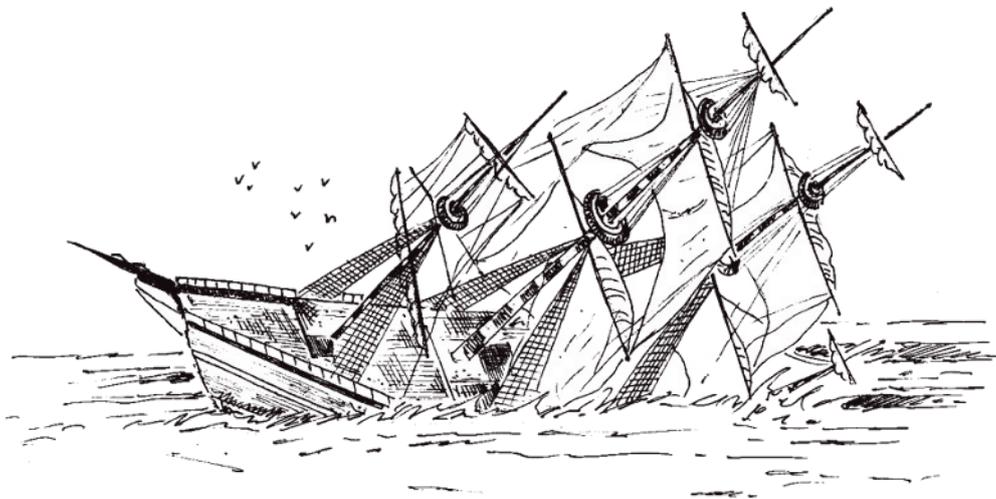


Figure 3. The shipwreck allegory used in the “Vecchio Magazzino Doganale” website⁴.

4. <https://www.vecchiomagazzinodoganale.com/en/>.

Consequently, they decided to walk inland until they arrived by chance at Raffaele's shop. The three Americans, in love with the land they crossed, decided to stay in Calabria and to undertake, with the collaboration of Raffaele "*u Giocondo*", an export business of local products. Among the three Americans, Jefferson was the one with the strongest passion for alcoholic beverages to the point of preparing a very valuable one based on some ingredients that can be found today in the award-winning liquor that takes his name: bergamot, rosemary and oregano.

Ivano managed to find traces of these "unexpected" foreign guests until the end of the 10s of the twentieth century, thanks to the memories passed down to the family by his great-grandfather and grandfather, who was a child at the time.

Then nothing else. This story, which ended in oblivion for a long time, re-emerged not long ago when Ivano and his father set out on the trail of grandfather Egidio, of whom there had been no news since the 1950s, after a trip to Rio de Janeiro looking for a job as a barber or shoemaker.

This story of adventure and love for the Calabrian land and its fruits could not fail to inspire a creative person like Ivano, passionate about his land and what his territory is able to offer. Looking at the Vecchio Magazzino Doganale website and at its products, everything evokes the above-mentioned story: from the name of the company, which reproduces that of the ancient shop of Ivano's great-grandfather, to the name of the winning liquor of the international competition, Jefferson, to the name of three other liquors that represent Jefferson's friends: *Roger*, *Gil* and *Madame Milù*. In fact, the usage of this particular storytelling gave the opportunity to the Vecchio Magazzino Doganale to introduce the Jefferson' crew. According to the story, Jefferson enchanted by the territory and by the richness of its botanic, decided to stay in Calabria and produce liquors (this is why the liquor package reports "*since 1873*"), however he was not alone. There was other two survivors of the shipwreck, namely Roger, the ship factotum, and Gil, the ship's doctor. Plus, Jefferson was in love with a Parisienne artist, *Madame Milù*, to which he was used to write several heartfelt letters.

Consequently, each of the abovementioned personages, *Jefferson*, *Roger*, *Gil*, and *Madame Milù*, correspond to a liquor introduced today by the Vecchio Magazzino Doganale (see fig. 4).



Figure 4. Jefferson' crew

Roger “extra Strong Bitter Amaro” is described as “Turbid from birth” and its taste can result even edgy, this is why the words “Keep under the counter” appear on the label. Its strong character makes it ideal, consumed smooth as after meal, for lovers of true bitter taste.

Gil is a gin made by “low altitude” juniper and PGI (i.e., protected geographical indication) lemons from Rocca Imperiale (CS). It also stands out for its original color. Tasted smooth it enhances its Mediterranean character.

Madame Milù is a liquor highly digestive, innovative and unique since it contains selected botanicals as chamomile, mint, marjoram still collected by hand and processed in separate and fresh infusions plus lemon balm, fennel seeds and absinthe processed in distillation.

Jefferson Bitter (Amaro Importante)

But let's get to Jefferson – “*Amaro Importante*⁵”, since 1871, the Vecchio Magazzino Doganale captain: a premium liquor “*intense on the nose, with a bitter hint ... soft, smooth and very well balanced, with a herbal finish*”, as the motivation for the award received states. Equipped with a Mediterranean taste that can be appreciated both at room temperature and cold, it is based on a serious of ingredients based on local territory in memory of the liquor created by the ancient American sailor who lived in Calabria: bitter and sweet oranges, the PGI lemon of Rocca Imperiale (in Cosenza) and the bergamot of Roccella Jonica (in Reggio Calabria), oregano and rosemary of Montalto Uffugo (in Cosenza). Next to the Jefferson bitter liquor the company offers also the Jefferson Tincture Important Extra Strong in an old-fashioned pharmaceutical bottle with a dropper, made with only the mother tinctures used to create the bitter. The tincture can be used as a flavoring in drinks (see fig. 5).



Figure 5. Jefferson' Tincture

“I have been producing Amaro Jefferson since my company was born – said Ivano – but behind it there is an intense research and experimental work that lasted at least five years and that I carried out always having in mind as a goal the creation of a liqueur natural and authentic like this territory, Calabria”. A work that was also rewarded by the positive response of the market on which in 2018 Vecchio Magazzino Doganale was present with a production of 12 thousand bottles, with a trend of exponential growth after the awarding of the recognition.

And discussing about the prize won, Ivano Trombino wanted to underline how his participation at the World Liqueur Awards took place almost by chance: *“We didn't even intend to participate – says Ivano amused – but at the end we decided to go encouraged by Fabio Torretta, marketing manager of The Compagnia dei Caraibi which distributes our products. It was a way to test ourselves measuring the value of our “bitterness” in an international comparison. So, we decided to participate without even worrying too much about the bottle labelling – maybe it was not even completely in place – but evidently the jurors have chosen to evaluate the intrinsic value of its content,*

5. “Important bitter” this is the wording reported in the Jefferson package.

rewarding the quality of the raw materials coming from our territory and our processing". The link with the territory was the leitmotif of Ivano's interview, who chose with determination to stay in Calabria, becoming an ambassador and promoter of the best use of indigenous ingredients in the production of liqueurs and in the particular in the production of the special ones. *"I can proudly say - added Ivano - that I have created my entrepreneurship reality by myself, without any regional financial support, and it was truly an honor for me to be able to raise the name of Calabria and Italy at the World Liqueur Awards, prevailing on labels from every corner of the planet thanks to my personal effort. This prestigious award, and the great consensus that was resulting from it, can only represent a stimulus to do more and better in order to give more and more value to the extraordinary resources of this land, in spite of those who consider it a place from which to escape"*.

Regarding the relationship of the Vecchio Magazzino Doganale with its territory, Ivano wanted to underline that *"...differently from other regional liquors, or regional realities, we do not abuse of the Calabrian and Southern Italy images with obvious stereotypes. Our packages do not contain any evident reference to Calabria, only ingredients traceability explicitly refers to localities and consequently to the territory. This is very important for us because we want to promote instead of take advantage from our territory"*.

The Crew's Production

As previously mentioned, on the basis of the original storytelling present on its website, the Vecchio Magazzino Doganale introduced further additional liquors created by Jefferson with the help of its crew: “Intervallo”, “Frack” and “Dopolavoro” (fig. 6).



Figure 6. Liqueurs introduced by Jefferson's crew

Each of these liquors are described on the company website in terms of their main ingredients with a quote explaining the reason of their names. More interestingly, each product presents an additional story in which Jefferson is the imaginary author and at the same time alchemist explaining to the reader the inspiration that guided him for the creation of these additional liquors. “Intervallo”, for example, was created by the three Americans crew as a self-gratification, namely for enjoying of shorts breaks moments during their daily hard work, possibly together with a gramophone music.

The description used for “Frack” showed Jefferson at the Scala in Milan – where probably he was used to meet *Madame Milù* – worried about the long temp spent away from Calabria and from his friends, Gil and Roger. In fact, the website reported the following text: “*The distance from Milù made me crazy, I spent evenings at the Scala of Milan before returning to Calabria. I did not know if my friends accepted me, I was missing for two months, too many to find excuses ... But I was in love... Every night at the end of the counter, almost in the dark, there was a man. We soon became friends ... We talked for hours and he fascinated me with his emblematic stories between Love and Eros, between Art and Theater, a real laboratory, a unique and rare palate... On my return, I did not find myself as easy as I thought. Roger and Gil, only after many months, gave me the opportunity to talk about Milù, my great love, but above all that unruly man I knew in Milan ... They were im-*

mediately fascinated. They asked for his name and I did not know it, it was all damn strange. Without a reason, without logic, I called him Frack, a real man... strictly no alla moda...⁶

Finally, “*Dopolavoro*” is an invitation to conviviality typical of the Belle Epoque, with a package reporting the Vecchio Magazzino Doganale colored logos. The product description is quite emblematic, as it seems to represent the Vecchio Magazzino Doganale manifest: “*Love and friendship are said to be eternal, yet, because this magic persists must always be nourished by small but important details, in short, the flame must always be alive. At Vecchio Magazzino Doganale we have made it a lifestyle, starting from our history made of friendships, comparisons, beauty, love, moments that leave an indelible mark on the heart and head of each of us. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries seem so current today. The desire to be together, in a simple, convivial, elegant and colorful way, inevitably leads us to a slowdown, a pause to reorder ideas and create comparisons, smiles, emotions. A magical Italian moment, to restore the fatigue making us understand that time is precious. Our thought is: ‘it doesn’t matter where, but we are together’*”.

Finally, Vecchio Magazzino Doganale presents other three additional liquors, not directly related to the legendary Jefferson story, but linked to the Vecchio Magazzino Doganale tradition, with a specific focus on three ingredients typical of Calabrian lands: Licorice, Bergamotto and Cedro citrus fruits. However, despite Jefferson absence, the link with the Vecchio Magazzino Doganale’ roots are still present, as the three liqueurs (*Abracadabra*, *Bergamotto Fantastico* and *Diamante Acqua di Cedro*) are presented as made directly by “*u Giocondo*”, the Vecchio Magazzino Doganale founder, and therefore as original recipes of Ivano Trombino’s family. In fact, “*Bergamotto Fantastico*” and “*Diamante Acqua di Cedro*” are presented under the category “family heritage” and contrary to the other liquors, they present a transparent bottle, with a label quite essential clearly showing the Vecchio Magazzino Doganale logo (fig. 7). Conversely, “*Abracadabra*”, despite the clear reference to *u Giocondo* heritage in its description, presents a bottle shape and a label layout quite similar to the liquors introduced by the Jefferson’ crew (see fig. 6)⁷. However, it is important to note the magic atmosphere that the name “*Abracadabra*” wants to evoke for that product, in a way to differentiate the licorice-based liquor by other local and national alternatives present in the large supermarket chains.

6. https://www.vecchiomagazzinodoganale.com/en/#blocco_558.

7. The use of a black instead of transparent bottle is necessary because the color is coherent with the licorice colour.



Figure 7. Vecchio Magazzino Doganale Heritage

Looking Ahead

Together with its typical liquors production, the Vecchio Magazzino Doganale is involved in several complementary production activities, first of all that related to packaging innovation. In fact, Ivano has recently launched an “experience box” in which it is possible to have a selection of all the Vecchio Magazzino Doganale liquors in a mignon format, presented through the old-fashion pharmaceutical bottles. Despite this box it is mainly thought for bars expositions, it can also be ordered online for special occasions.

Moreover, the company is still involved in international exhibitions and competitions, last one in October 2021 in Berlin, and at the same time it has launched via their social media a merchandising line of t-shirt depicting all the personages of Jefferson’s crew, plus an elegant water bottle branded Vecchio Magazzino Doganale.

Looking ahead, close to the liqueurs production, its merchandising, and its alchemist activity inspired by natural resources of the land of Calabria, the new project that Ivano has in the pipeline is the birth of a botanical garden on an area of 18 thousand square meters in territory of Montalto Uffugo, where he is completely rebuilding the Vecchio Magazzino Doganale: a thought area, a spice room, one for infusions. *“Let’s say that it will be a contemporary speakeasy to promote the culture of drinking and receive visitors from all over the world”*, an unprecedented reality for these places that will not fail to be talked about.

The case of Vecchio Magazzino Doganale poses a series of questions that puzzle Ivano and its team when looking forward. First of all, from an economic perspective, the introduction of additional liquors with specific brand/names represents a diversification opportunity for the Vecchio Magazzino Doganale, however it can be a threat for the Jefferson leader brand. Then the principal question is: Can the organizational identity of the Vecchio Magazzino Doganale based on the brand leader “Jefferson” result compatible with the introduction of diversified liquors? How to avoid the market share erosion and cannibalization risk resulting from the introduction of new liquors?

Another issue is related to the typical Vecchio Magazzino Doganale’ customer. Who are the principal customers of Vecchio Magazzino Doganale liquors? What is the main benefit offered by Vecchio Magazzino Doganale compared to other regional and national liquors?

Finally, contrary to other local and national “competitors”, the company communication strategy is focused on the absence of direct links with the territory. What are the main strengths and weakness connected to this choice? Another characteristic of the used communication strategy is the presence of storytelling, that in general is related to specific emotions. What is the specific emotional appeal used by Vecchio Magazzino Doganale? Is it possible to find possible alternative appeals that can be equally successful for the company?

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